



Helpful Insights and Lessons from a District Ranger for Managing a Fire in the COVID-19 Environment

By

Martha A. Williamson, District Ranger
Divide Ranger District, Rio Grande National Forest

Trust your gut when something doesn't sit right.

Agency Administrators need to set the example in our behavior and be sufficiently knowledgeable about COVID mitigations to set effective expectations.

So far so lucky on our Goose Creek incident. But relying on luck is not the way to operate. We are therefore working on tuning-up our systems. We still have a lot to learn. I hope this RLS provides other Agency Administrators a leg up.

The majority of this RLS is focused on things that I now know I could have done better. My key lesson: Trust your gut when something doesn't sit right.



Once the Goose Creek Fire became largely contained, firefighters had the time to perform training, including practicing techniques for moving an injured firefighter over long distances in uneven terrain. Photo by Andy Lyon.

Background

Revised Leader's Intent on the Goose Creek Incident

- ❖ Limit the potential for COVID-19 spread within the Goose Creek incident and between incident personnel and the community:
 - Coordinate with the Rio Grande National Forest COVID Response IMT for current best practices and forest operating procedures.
 - ❖ Communicate and ensure all resources observe COVID-19 mitigations:
 - Use cloth face coverings when indoors or when >6' spacing cannot be maintained—even outside, wash/sanitize hands frequently, and avoid shared surfaces.
 - ❖ Ensure contact tracing is immediately implementable in case of any positive or presumptive positive cases of COVID-19.
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What was Planned

- ❖ Per pre-season Agency Administer SOPs developed with the San Luis Valley Public Health Partnership Emergency Preparedness and Response, made early connection with regional public health contact so that this was on their radar as out-of-area-resources came in.
- ❖ Initial Delegation, Objectives and Leader's Intent to ICT3:
 - Delegation: *In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I expect you to be familiar with and implement the guidance described within the "Wildland Fire Response Plan COVID-19 Pandemic" as provided by the Rocky Mountain Geographic Area. I expect you to use remote overhead to the greatest extent feasible.*
 - Objectives in WFDSS: pulled from Delegation.
 - Leader's Intent: enclosure to the Delegation, Expectations: *Follow COVID-19 mitigation protocols and ensure contact tracing is immediately implementable in case of any positive or presumptive positive cases of COVID-19.*
- ❖ IAPs:
 - ICS 204, Division Assignments, include special instruction: *Follow COVID-19 protocols by adhering to social distancing and wearing masks when you can't keep 6 feet of separation.*



Firefighter on the Goose Creek Fire. Photo by Andy Lyon.

What Actually Happened

- ❖ Contact with San Luis Valley Public Health Partnership Emergency Preparedness and Response Coordinator:
 - Made connection and updated with first round of resources ordered and camp location.
 - Public health acknowledged information but did not have additional follow up.
- ❖ COVID had no influence on choice of initial strategy but did influence decision to escalate to IMT3 in order to have the LOGS and PLANS functions to accommodate a spike camp-style ICP, emphasize remote finance, and facilitate contact tracing.
- ❖ Need for pandemic awareness and mitigations conveyed in AA message, safety message, and IC closing comments at briefing; I wasn't at all briefings.
- ❖ The COVID-related objective and expectations in the Leader's Intent in the initial Delegation to the ICT3 did not sit as sufficient, relevant or effective. Therefore, those changed to more specific and directive ones in subsequent Delegations.
- ❖ The majority of fire resources are based in a remote location with no interaction with local communities other than the private ranch owners. Helicopters were primarily based out of the Creede, Colo. municipal airport although one was based in Del Norte. Helicopter and helitack crews hoteled in South Fork and Del Norte.
- ❖ Finance and time were virtual.



The Goose Creek Fire burning near the top of Goose Creek Canyon. Photo courtesy Rio Grande National Forest.

Lessons Learned

- ❖ In my opinion, AADMs need to be very aware of what they trust, trust but verify, and what they direct in general and in the COVID environment in specific. This is particularly the case on emerging incidents and ones managed by ad-hoc teams, especially with off-unit resources coming in. We are all learning how to pandemic at different rates—both in knowing the mitigations and in adopting the habits. It is not safe to assume that everyone simply “knows” what to do or will do it.
- ❖ As important as it is for everyone engaged in fire to retain focus on the fire itself, becoming great at the basic universal COVID precautions (physical distance, cloth face covering, hand sanitizing/washing, and ability to contact trace) is super important. In discussions with local public health, their orders for possible exposure to confirmed or presumptive positive is a 14-day quarantine, end of story. This has major implications to incident response and logistics. Therefore, minimizing spread potential is essential. They have legal authority to isolate/quarantine. CDC guidance for wildland firefighters or imaginations of “critical” workforce status granting exemptions to isolation or quarantine are neither here nor there to public health when they have the duty to contain a highly contagious virus.
- ❖ Hubris is real and we all would do well to remember that no one is immune to the virus or to being party to spreading it.

**I became aware of all of the following revelations six shifts into the incident.
These bullets should therefore start with “I should have”:**

- ❖ Put more thought during pre-season to what COVID-related mitigations and entry avenues are important for me to know and confirm firsthand, as well as which are acceptable to trust will be managed appropriately. This is very much a personal uncertainty tolerance question and would have been cool for me to have thought through beforehand. I notice I’ve anchored on the importance of contact tracing and am less aware of the established protocols for fire camp COVID mitigations.
- ❖ Put more attention to knowing the Rocky Mountain Coordinating Group (RMCG) COVID mitigations for myself, or assigning a COVID-mitigation specialist, to be able to be more helpful to the IMT rather than just instructing them to follow those mitigations.
- ❖ Put more attention to translating the various lessons learned/rapid lessons sharing floating around that tend to focus on IMT/operations into “what does this mean as AADM?” and what role do I want to play as AADM in having these lessons learned adopted. Same thought as above on the COVID-mitigation specialist.
- ❖ Put more intention into the COVID behavior example I wanted to set. Briefings are outdoors and observed 6’ spacing, as are meetings with IC, IC(t), Ops and PIO, so I have not been wearing a cloth face covering. This complies with basic recommended mitigations and there may be a benefit to delivering an AADM message with full facial expressions visible. But I wonder about setting a different example and having the face covering on while moving around ICP—even if more than 6’ away from others.
- ❖ Pulled together our local “state of the valley” information that we already have on hand, including trends and case counts. This might have been useful to put in an in-brief packet or standing AADM message to frame the importance of mitigations.
- ❖ Thought about the helibase and 4th of July in Creede, Colo. sooner than 1300 on the 4th—with apologies and thanks to IC, IC(t), and Ops for rolling with my late notice to them to close camp and helibase through the weekend. Creede is not having a parade or fireworks for the 4th but apparently still have outdoor vendors and also a lot of visitors from out of state. This was a concern not just from the perspective of fire personnel going to mingle in the community but also from the perspective of the whole community showing up to investigate the helibase.
 - This is relevant for AADM’s with local festivities planned near their ICPs and helibases. On that note, it’s important to remember helibases since they are rarely in the same place as ICP.

This RLS was submitted by:

**Martha A. Williamson, District Ranger
Divide Ranger District, Rio Grande National Forest**

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